



Department of  
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# Fact Sheet

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## **Parkinson's Disease: *VA Benefits and Programs***

Parkinson's disease is a serious health problem in the United States. About 1.5 million Americans have the disease and approximately 50,000 new cases are diagnosed each year, according to the National Parkinson Foundation. VA medical centers treat at least 20,000 patients each year who have Parkinson's. More than 600 veterans receive disability compensation for the illness.

Parkinson's disease is slowly progressive and caused by degeneration of cells in a region of the midbrain that produces the neurotransmitter dopamine. Symptoms include tremors, slowness of movement, stiffness of limbs and problems with gait or balance. While treatments exist, there is no cure for this debilitating disease.

### **Compensation and Health Care**

To qualify for VA disability compensation for Parkinson's, a veteran must have a current diagnosis of the disease and evidence that it was acquired in service. Normally, this means that symptoms began or worsened on active duty or within a year of discharge.

Veterans with Parkinson's disease are eligible for VA health care and are exempt from co-payment requirements for hospital and outpatient medical services if they are receiving compensation for any service-connected disability or if their income is at or below the income limits.

Veterans with Parkinson's disease may be subject to medication co-payment requirements. Exempted from medication co-payment requirements are veterans whose service-connected conditions are 50 percent or greater, whose medication is for the service-condition or whose income is at or below the pension threshold.

As of December 2000, there were 649 veterans who were service-connected for Parkinson's disease.

All veterans are eligible to enroll for VA health care. Veterans can obtain information on enrollment by calling 1-877-222-8387.

### **New Centers**

To better address the needs of veterans with Parkinson's disease, in February 2001 VA announced creation of six centers specializing in Parkinson's disease.

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The centers, named Parkinson's Disease Research, Education and Clinical Centers (PADRECCs), will be established at VA medical centers in Houston, Philadelphia, Portland (Ore.), Richmond, San Francisco and West Los Angeles. The new centers are scheduled to open October 1.

VA is committing more than \$30 million to support the centers over the next four years. The centers will conduct research concentrating on specific problems of Parkinson's disease and movement disorders. Research will also include other basic biomedical, clinical and health services studies.

Each new center also will be a participating site in a VA Cooperative Studies multicenter clinical trial of deep-brain stimulation, involving surgical implantation of tiny electrodes through which the patient can control activity in the area of the brain involved in Parkinson's disease.

The Parkinson's centers will develop education and training programs for patients, families, students and health care professionals. Additionally, each site will conduct a clinical care demonstration program for evaluating new models of care delivery for veterans with Parkinson's disease and movement disorders. Plans call for information to be shared electronically.

The creation of the centers builds on an alliance formed by VA and the National Parkinson Foundation, Inc. (NPF) in June 1999 to improve care and find a cure for the debilitating disease. The agreement calls for the two organizations to work together to develop research and treatment symposiums, publicize information on Parkinson's disease and provide continuing education for VA physicians who treat Parkinson's patients.

### **Research Initiatives**

VA is in the vanguard of neurodegenerative disease research with innovative and aggressive research strategies in Parkinson's disease and other neurodegenerative illnesses. This year, \$5.8 million was allocated for 45 medical and rehabilitation research projects in Parkinson's disease.

New research in Parkinson's disease is focused on two important areas, development of surgical treatments for late-stage patients for whom medical therapy is no longer effective, and development of new medications, which are more effective and have fewer side effects. VA researchers are conducting groundbreaking studies in both areas.

Recent research advances by VA investigators include:

- Scientists at VA medical centers in Tampa (Fla.) and San Diego are investigating the use of animal stem cells that can be induced to develop into dopamine-producing nerve cells;

- Clinical trials at Augusta (Ga.), Richmond (Va.) and New York City medical centers are designed to test the effectiveness of new drugs that would stimulate dopamine receptors;
- Researchers at Miami, Portland (Ore.) and Ann Arbor (Mich.) are investigating aspects of glutamate metabolism to lead to new medical treatments for Parkinson's disease;
- In its ongoing commitment to high quality research in Parkinson's disease, VA approved three new Research Enhancement Award Programs at Baltimore, Bedford (Mass.) and Denver that are designed to stimulate innovative approaches to the study of Parkinson's disease and to promote training of new researchers.

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